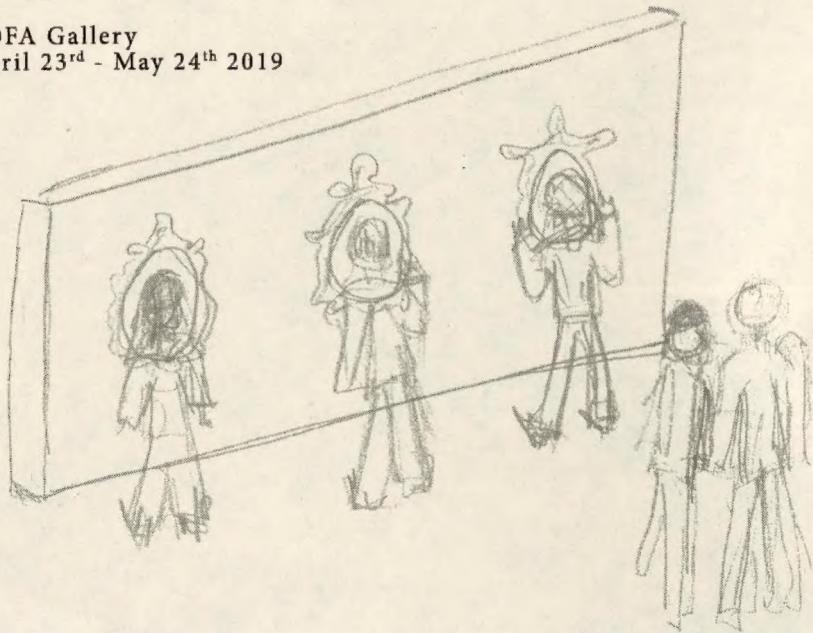




Objects of Sound
Philippe Battikha

FOFA Gallery
April 23rd - May 24th 2019



Even if sound is the point, when I look at these pieces I can't help but think about what they feel like. There's the bingo machine and its wobbly legs, the metal sides that feel weathered, the scratched plexiglass framing the pool of balls and its inherent drama. Then there's the hair-dryer chair, with its art deco leftovers design, its feeling of having been sat in many decades ago. There's the stopwatch, wound by hand, that provided the ambush soundtrack to a commuter tunnel, here in Montreal, sometime last year. There are also the portraits, ornate frames from an ornamental age, retrofitted with warm ovoid spaces in which to dunk your head, close your eyes, and actually listen.

The bingo machine looks like it was made in the Kennedy era. There's a circular paddle on a spring that rotates the balls, and a vacuum tube to suck them up. It was abandoned by a burnt-out church in Bedford-Stuyvesant and appears to have seen a great deal of action. Fat church ladies leaping out of their seats when their number was called. Shrieks of joy, raffle tickets, the disappointed wiping of cards. PB has outfitted the still-working machine with a twelve inch subwoofer, something you might see installed in a teenager's car.

The hair dryer is another power object, infused with the casual decadence of late 20th century capitalism, specifically in relation to women. To look at this chair is to be confronted with images of housewives smoking cigarettes and reading magazines, getting their hair done, gossiping, sizing each other up, and chatting the day away in a creamy photograph from an old family album. With such images in mind, the experience of sitting in the chair and listening in on a distant section of the building lobby in real-time is so jarring, such a compounding of past and present, that it's all you can do, again, just to listen.

The stopwatch is arranged on a directional speaker so that standing ten feet away you're slapped with the experience of a tiny clock literally ticking away in your face – as if life itself weren't enough! The impulse to take such a small mechanical thing and project it so largely, so obviously metaphorically and literally, is audacious and satisfying and ASMR-inducing all at once. The first time I heard it, all I could do was instinctively bow my head and listen. Impossibly, the object and its innate sound separate, enter one's brain, merge back together, until eventually, you start to realize that listening, much like looking, is a sister to learning, and that to listen is to learn, to learn is to listen, and so on, forever.

The portraits are the most to-the-point of the lessons in listening PB is offering. To dunk one's head in the wall is to put oneself in a vulnerable position. You end up standing there, ass out, eyes closed, completely absorbed in deciphering a strange soundscape. It invites a voluntary rejection of the world that a person like myself, who cannot even walk around with headphones, may find unsettling. However, once in this position, you are immediately struck by the inversion of how one looks at paintings, of how the act of looking across a room functions. With your head in the wall, the vulnerability opens up your ears, and there's a sense of private discovery inside each frame, much the way an Ingre portrait can create a secret conversation with those who contemplate one long enough. It's an astounding inversion, a cry to call the entire history of portraiture into question, and an open-ended question at that. And this is very much the game PB is playing – portraits to listen to, watches to grab you by the guts, chairs to spy in, frames to transport you to another world, and hovering over all of that, the same insistent question: what does it feel like to listen? What is this lesson in listening?

Matthew Gagnon Blair



What is at stake when one truly listens, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message?

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*

